Developing young people's capacities to navigate adversity

Sharlene Swartz and Crain Soudien (Human Sciences Research Council)

There are multiple factors that can help interrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Education and employment are central: keeping young people in school, and ensuring that the quality of education received enables access to further skills training to improve their chances of entering the labour market. Accessing public goods such as health care, good nutrition, clean water and sanitation and housing that provides shelter and dignity is also fundamental. Social, cultural and symbolic capitals[1] that enable access to networks, improve psychosocial well-being, provide insight into the so-called "rules of the game" and open opportunities for advancement and entry into the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship are also critical.

Previous editions of the *South African Child Gauge* have shown how the lives of children and young people are affected not only by their immediate contexts[2] of home, school and community, but also by structural systems such as policies, laws, social welfare and the world financial system. Political shifts over time also impact young people's lives, and this is especially important in the South African context where young people have experienced a movement from apartheid to democracy.

In this concluding essay we focus on youth and the intergenerational transmission of poverty and ask:

- How are young people in South Africa doing?
- What is needed to develop a strong implementation plan for youth development?
- What new directions could help youth (and those who work with them) navigate adversity?

How are young people in South Africa doing?

This edition has chosen to focus on of the ways in which education (school and beyond), the labour market, parenting, health, mobility (or stability), and belonging – either perpetuate or disrupt poverty amongst young people. Some areas such as health, education and employment are obvious choices, but others such as parenting, mobility and belonging are areas that youth scholars are increasingly flagging as important in offering nuanced explanations for young people's well-being. In both categories, each essay sought to address the state of the evidence: What is known and not known about how young people are affected in this domain; and what are the opportunities for intervention?

In the introductory essay on p. 22, De Lannoy, Leibbrandt and Frame drew attention to important trends concerning youth in South Africa, some of which are worth repeating:

- Poverty levels[i] for youth between 15 and 24 have, since 1996, decreased slightly for African youth (from 69% to 65% in 2011), remained the same for White and Indian youth, but increased for Coloured youth (from 37% to 40%).[3]
- While the number of years of education undertaken by young people has increased, this has not translated into greater levels of employment; nor have skills levels between generations increased, perpetuating low income levels for many youth who do enter the labour market.
- Youth under the age of 25 comprise almost half of South Africa's population and those between age 15 and 24 make up 20%.[4]

This latter trend – that of a large youth population – is of special importance.[5] Many believe it represents an unusual window of opportunity. With fewer dependants (both children and aging parents) than at any other time in history, young people have the aspiration and potential for enormous economic productivity. But they have to be – at a minimum – educated, healthy and employed. If this is not the case, it is feared that there will be no "demographic dividend" such as has occurred in Asia[6], and that instead youth might turn to restlessness and frustration as was seen recently in the Middle East and North Africa[7].

Education, health and employment alone pose enormous challenges for young people mired in poverty. Low rates of school completion, early drop-out and poor quality schooling become a "poverty trap" for youth, as explained in the essay by Spaull on p. 34. Despite having more years of schooling than their parents, the poor quality of their education results in, on the one hand, unemployment or low skilled jobs, and on the other, to limited *access* to post-school and higher education. Those who have post-school qualifications earn significantly more than those who do not.

From a health perspective, the essay by Cooper, De Lannoy and Rule on p. 60 focused on reproductive health (including time of child bearing and the challenges posed by HIV/AIDS), the consequences of exposure to violence and substance misuse – and its effects on economic productivity. The authors also touched on issues of mental health – showing how poverty's silent effects of depression, hopelessness, stress and anxiety are frequently undiagnosed and

i Using the upper bound poverty level of R620 per person per month, based on the StatsSA upper-bound poverty line for 2011.

seldom treated due to an absence of facilities. The same holds true for young people with cognitive and physical disabilities – there is an absence of research and visible treatment options for poor youth.

The other issues addressed in this *Child Gauge* – parenting, mobility and belonging – also have economic effects. Poverty detracts from the support, guidance and supervision possible from parents or peers. Young people are frequently mobile – often in contexts of ruptured communal ties and diminished social support. For many this is a gamble. Not all benefit from their move to urban areas and they may lose the opportunity of building their sense of citizenship and belonging.

In their treatment of each issue, contributors have tried to dispel many of the moral panics besetting the country – "school-girl pregnancy", "youth-headed homes", "rampant youth violence" and "ticking unemployment time bombs". Of course young people are in dire straits – but they also have enormous potential to act in their own interests and for the benefit of their families and society in general.

What is needed to develop a strong implementation plan for youth development?

This *Child Gauge* has showcased the many ways in which the effects of poverty are both transmitted and interrupted, and has placed equal focus on multidisciplinary evidence, policies and interventions from various sources. This approach provides important insights into what support to youth is already underway, and what can be done immediately and in the longer term. Among the many individual recommendations that each essay makes, five overarching themes have emerged. These are worth restating as a series of strategic steps or questions for action and analysis, and are summarised in figure 22.

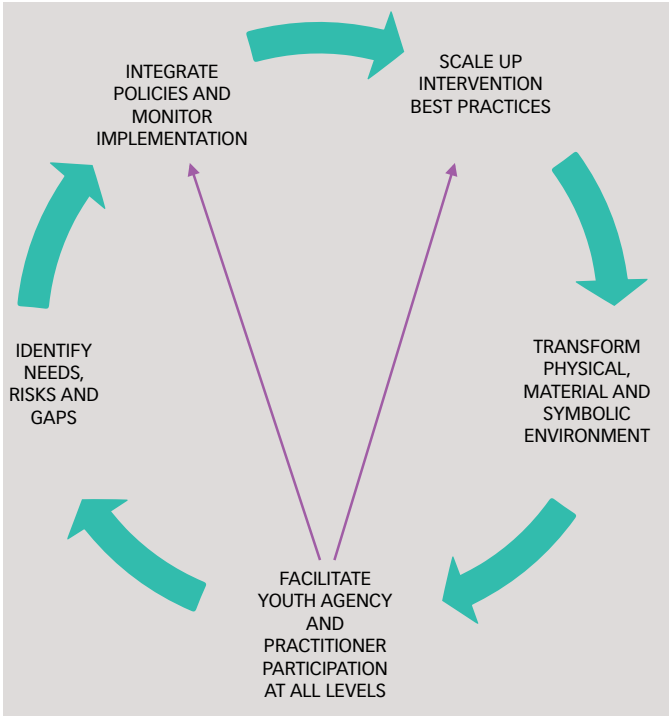
Facilitate youth agency and practitioner involvement at all levels

Despite the fact that many of the challenges that young people face are structural in nature, young people have valuable insights to contribute. Furthermore, when young people participate in formulating policies and strategies they tend to remain engaged and have repeatedly demonstrated an ability to organise and act. Activate!, IkamvaYouth and the Rhodes Must Fall movement are a few of many good examples. The same goes for youth work practitioners, many of whom are key drivers in youth NGOs and other community-based initiatives. Whilst both these groups (youth and practitioners) are frequently included in consultations, it is seldom at all levels of engagement, and rarely as a starting point. Engaging youth and youth practitioners is a key starting point in ensuring a strong implementation plan for youth development.

Identify needs, risks and gaps

Youth and practitioners have a particularly useful role to play in identifying young people's changing *needs* and the *risks* they face. Too little investment is made into regular national surveys that cover the entire range of these needs and risks. Instead data are

Figure 22: Five recommendations for evaluating a strong youth development plan



sporadic, target different sub-categories of youth, and result in persistent knowledge gaps. Not enough is known, for example, about youth living with disabilities, as well as the mental health issues they face (including those resulting from racism, learning disabilities and their relationship to aggression and violence), and how best to offer services to address these. The definition of "youth" also needs to be revisited so that interventions are better targeted. There are enormous differences between young people aged 15 – 19, 20 – 29 and those over 30. This wide age range of youth may have been useful at transition in 1994,[8] but we now need to think differently. Furthermore, a lot of the existing research tends to capture moments in time – rather than being longitudinal which would allow us to see trends over time and measure which interventions work and yield lasting benefit. Studies also tend to be clustered around youth sexual health, due to the huge impact of HIV and AIDS. This must now change. Efforts must also resolutely focus on understanding how youth are by themselves, and with others, attempting to overcome adversity.

Integrate policies and monitor implementation

The need to address the lack of coordination of youth policies needs little explication. A key example is how youth employment policies and programmes are located in at least nine government departments. In some respects the new National Youth Policy 2015 – 2020 addresses lack of coordination by proposing provincial youth desks, although it does not yet have an implementation plan to realise this goal. The monitoring of policy implementation has also been poor. The policy that pregnant learners are not to be permanently excluded from school – but they frequently are in practice – serves as an important example. It may now

be necessary to establish a youth ministry or at least an inter-ministerial parliamentary portfolio committee for youth affairs to ensure that policies are both coordinated, and implemented as planned.

Evaluate best practices and scale up

As with policy coordination and implementation, there is also serious lack of mechanisms to evaluate and scale up interventions for youth. Competitive funding environments for non-governmental organisations, the dearth of skilful facilitators to bring youth agencies together for common purpose, and the lack of government coordination for youth development keep excellent programmes local and benefit only a few. Many of the programmes showcased in the essays offer promise but urgently need to be evaluated, and the successful ones need to be scaled up and rolled out. Of course such evaluations and scale ups are expensive – both in terms of money, time and the will to build, metaphorically speaking, a city of benefit instead of individual houses.

Transform the physical, material and symbolic environment

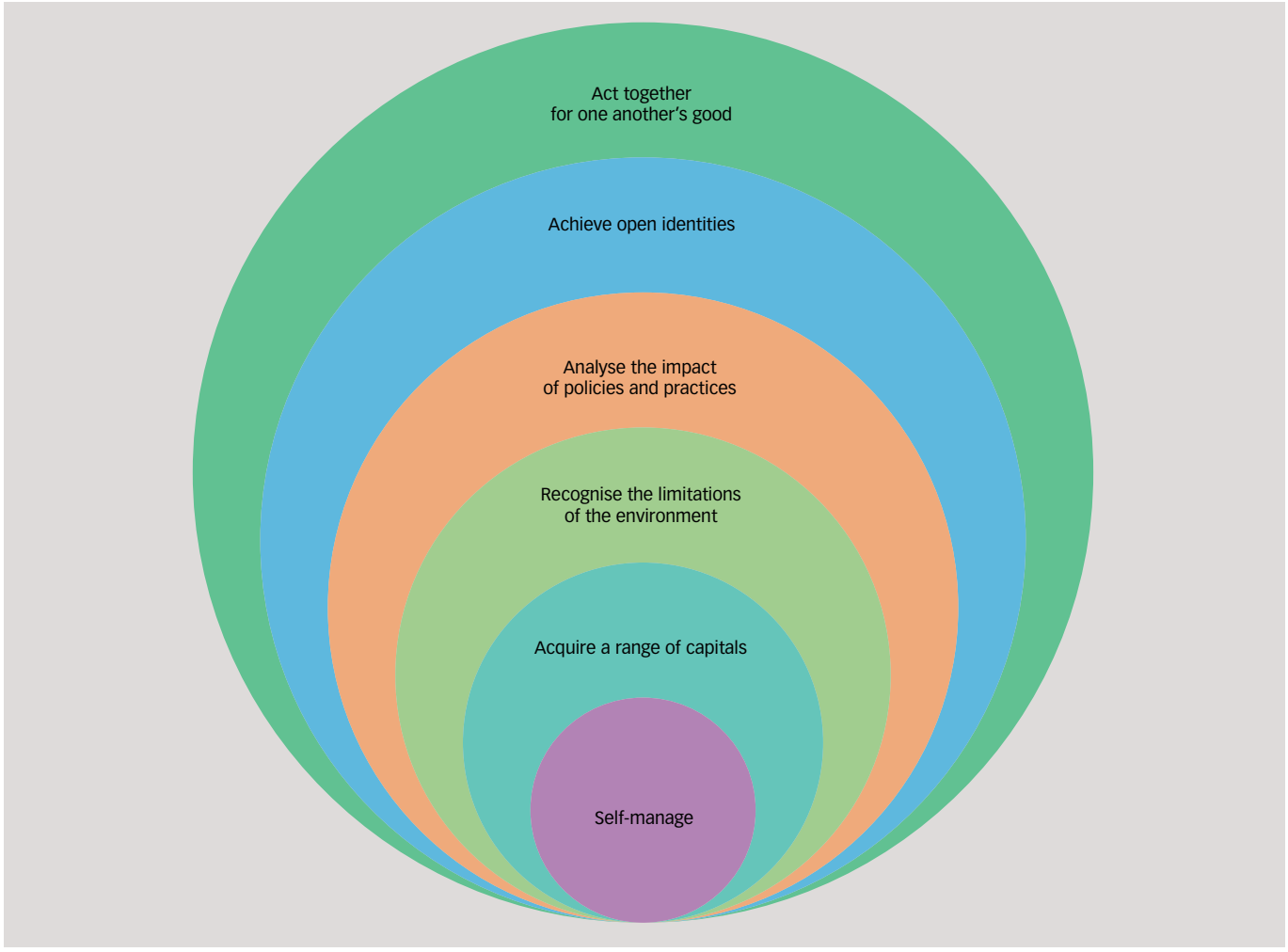
Arguably many of the policies and interventions described in this *Child Gauge* will no longer be needed if wide-reaching structural change is achieved – such as universal employment and access to health, housing, education, and social security. Of course, this is easy to state but difficult to achieve. Furthermore, this basic structural change needs to be accompanied by deeper symbolic transformation. Places where youth live need to foster *dignity*, *equality* and *belonging*, education needs to be of a *high quality*, and geared to ensure *meaningful* employment. Communities need to be safe, and offer opportunities to enjoy friendships, establish families, and participate in civic decision-making across previous divides. These are mammoth goals for a country burdened by a history of domination and inequality.

So while structural change is a priority, if no effort is made to topple racial domination and gender oppression, the gains made will not last. Without such transformation, policies and programmes will only help a few – those who are able to access remedial support to mitigate risk or those who are exceptionally resilient. An enabling and transformed environment for young people must be possible for all young people.

Developing a scorecard

As blunt an instrument as scorecards are, they serve an important function to promote discussion. They serve as a reminder to monitor how we are doing. The strategic questions described above lend themselves to asking, in each of the areas covered in this *Child*

Figure 23: A set of navigational capacities for youth in South Africa



Gauge (and in others too), how are we doing? A scorecard that follows these questions offers the opportunity to include multiple perspectives; to discuss opinions and examine evidence, not only in broad areas, but by asking deeper questions in a focused manner. Fundamentally, the value of a scorecard lays not so much in the rating given, but in the way it compels us – as practitioners and policy-makers – to interrogate current actions.

With regards to education, how are we including youth voices and practitioner participation? With regards to health, how is it that we seem to be faring somewhat better, but seem to be failing dismally in the areas of, for example, civic engagement and belonging? Why have we tended to be better at identifying needs, risks and gaps across many areas, yet still fail to scale up best practices in any? What practices need to be urgently scaled up to bring about the most significant benefit, and how might we go about achieving this in the next two to five years? Are we doing enough to integrate policies and monitor implementation, especially since we now have a new Youth Policy and pending implementation plans? Are we keeping track of efforts to change the material circumstances of young people as well as the symbolic environment of race and gender? These are the questions we hope these five recommendations provoke, and which along with a participatory and consultative scorecard, may serve to focus on the outcomes we want to achieve for young people.

What new directions could help youth (and those who work with them) navigate adversity?

Almost all the issues highlighted in this *Child Gauge* – education, employment, health, parenting, mobility and belonging– apply disproportionally to young people growing up in the aftermath of apartheid. Young people who live in more privileged contexts have far more capitals to draw on. Even while some of them live in families that have problems, they still, on average, have access to more social, cultural and financial capital. This is seldom true for a young person living in poverty. Instead, their problems quickly escalate – ill health or youthful parenting may turn to school drop-out, school drop-out results in failure to get decent work, chronic unemployment may result in substance misuse, and substance misuse slides into criminality. There are of course many pathways – not all of them as dire as the one just described – but most require intervention in order to help young people get back on track. At each stage there are structural impediments to overcome – but are there perhaps new ways of talking about the tools young people need to successfully navigate these structural and social constraints?

Speaking only of youth risk-taking, or youthful resilience, ignores the structural nature of these constraints and tends to place individual effort and individual remediation at the centre of the intervention. A new direction[ii] for youth development research and practice must begin to talk about the *navigational capacities* that these young people need in order to achieve the best possible outcomes given their environments. Navigational capacities are no more than a conceptual metaphor that evokes a sense of what kind of capacities (inspired by the work of Arjun Appadurai[9]) youth need to negotiate difficult terrain and achieve a successful outcome, recognising that the shift from adversity to advantage is a journey *over time* requiring some direction – hence *navigational*[10]. Furthermore, that the way forward is through competencies that can be acquired or learned, rather than dependent on external resources – hence a *capacity*. Navigational capacities take seriously youth context and values which may differ substantially from the dominant methods and theories currently in use. Such a conceptual metaphor draws together developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's work on the various systems that impact on youth development, and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's multiple forms of capital – which we have previously described. We offer six tentative navigational capacities (see figure 23) for youth development in adverse contexts such as South Africa.

These are novel ideas – and require much more work, discussion and application. What follows are initial ideas about the broad domains in which youth might be helped to develop these capacities in various ways – by adults offering guidance and mentoring, by youth organising themselves and learning by doing, and by academics highlighting good practices to follow or contextualise. It is our hope that these capacities will be a catalyst to move the discussion from deficit to asset, from the transmission to the disruption of poverty, and from universal strategies to those attuned to particular contexts.

The capacity to act together for one another's good

Young people living in adversity are often influenced by collective cultural and religious values. Often, not always, these offer opportunities for positive social action[11] for working together to navigate hostile contexts, advocating for resources, and mobilising to effect change[12]. Such collective action cannot be underestimated, but it is also not sufficiently encouraged as an important strategy for youth development.

The capacity to achieve open, non-oppressive identities

For young people living in adverse and challenging environments, the issue of self-esteem is frequently entangled in group identities especially with regard to race, class, gender, ethnicity and geography.[13] In order to navigate these fraught contexts, it is critical that young people develop the capacity to achieve a personal and group sense of belonging. This is also related to the effect of joblessness on self-esteem,[14] and on the way those who are frustrated by joblessness treat one another (gender based-violence[15] for example). It is therefore critical for young people in adversity to find ways to embrace diversity, to adopt non-oppressive practices, and to do so both individually and collectively. Communities, families, churches, schools, and government all have a role to play in helping them to achieve this.

ii The Human Sciences Research Council is currently embarking on a research study on the resources and strategies needed by young people living in the Global South to navigate adversity.

The capacity to analyse the impact of the policies and practices of their extended environment

Bronfenbrenner frequently shows how various policies, practices and institutions influence the lives of children and youth even when they are not intended to have a *direct* influence on their lives such as their parents' working hours, a city's transport regulations, and government policies on health, education and migration. This *Child Gauge* has illustrated how these systems impact on perpetuating poverty. It is therefore essential that youth develop the capacity to help change these systems, and to offer suggestions on how the effect of policies and practices on their lives are analysed and understood. This would ensure that young people do not blame themselves for many of the constraints they experience – which so often leads to hopelessness, anti-social behaviour and avolition – the loss of will to act[16]. Instead this capacity has the potential to identify strategies to "work around" the barriers that are *not of their own making*, yet which stand in their way. Many of these aims are likely to be achieved by having explicit discussion with young people and by intentionally bringing these discussions into the realm of policy-making and implementation.

The capacity to recognise the interconnecting effects of primary environments

Related, yet not so distant, is the capacity to recognise the ways in which the primary contexts of school, home, community and "streets" interact to either help or hinder young people's development. Here community includes cultural and religious influences while streets connote primarily the recreational pursuits of youth culture including all forms of media. For young people living in poverty, key to navigating their lives is the capacity to fully understand the way in which social connections derived from family, school, mosque, or sports club might help them in the future, as well as how to overcome their negative features.

The capacity to acquire a range of capitals

To speak of capitals is to speak of the fuel that drives success. These capitals include the social connections referred to earlier, as well as an ability to interpret the rules that govern upward mobility, community and national development, workplace successes along with actual financial wealth and assets. Here the capacities needed are those which help young people individually and collectively to set goals and make plans, articulate views in convincing and productive ways, and evaluate opportunities to judge which to pursue and from which to walk away. Developing these capacities will require focused attention and support in homes, schools, communities and local and national government structures.

The capacity to self-manage

Finally, young people need to be helped to develop their self-management capacities – to see themselves as agents rather than victims, to overcome disappointments and failures – of which there are likely to be many, and to plan time and resources, especially given the scarcity of ongoing work until at least their late twenties.[17] Placing self-management last is also intentional; a push back against the many ways in which youth interventions frequently begin by asking individuals to choose, little realising how few choices there actually are. Self-management is important but cannot and must not stand on its own.

Last word

This concluding essay has touched on the many ways in which young people's lives in South Africa are affected by poverty. Each essay has offered in some detail what these actions might be. It has also offered a five-fold rubric through which implementation plans in each area might be evaluated: How is South Africa doing to ensure youth agency and practitioner participation? What do we know in each area of young people's lives and are we able to plug the gaps? Is there coordination amongst the many policies that sit across government departments and what is being done to ensure they are implemented as was envisaged? What plans and strategies do we have to identify and scale up as best practices for youth development? What progress is being made to transform the physical, material and symbolic environments in which young people are expected to inhabit and thrive?

More imaginatively, this essay has suggested ways in which young people and those who work with them and advocate on their behalf might map out the way forward for young people's development in the midst of adversity. We are far from a consensus of what these navigational capacities may be or from fully describing them, and even less certain about how best they might be implemented. However, we are hopeful that this collection of focused evidence, new questions and fresh language has offered manageable steps towards achieving the vision we all share – as practitioners, policy-makers, academics and civil society – for disrupting the effects of poverty on South Africa's youth.

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